



Chapter 23

VETERANS AFFAIRS

HIGHLIGHTS

- Increase the number of fully developed claims from 50% to 80% over a 5 year period. This procedure would improve efficiency and at the same time allow for a more complete claim, resulting in an increase in compensation with reduced wait time for veterans.
- Co-locating facilities/field offices with other state agencies provides one-stop-shopping for our veterans and increases customer service.
- Implement a control system for priority inquiries, assigning very specific responsibilities and clarified procedures. This provides a tracking mechanism for legislative/priority inquiries.
- Changing leadership responsibilities from functional area to geographical area promotes customer service and communication with local leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs (TDVA) serves the state's more than 500,000 veterans and an estimated 1.5 million family members and survivors through a statewide power-of-attorney based claims processing system. The Field and Claims staff are trained and accredited to work with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) to maximize earned entitlements and benefits for veterans, their families and survivors.

The system is complex and constantly changing due to court decisions and legislative changes. The expertise of the claims staff makes the system more accessible for Tennessee's veterans. The TDVA conducts mandated training and certification programs for county-employed service officers who contribute to veterans receiving maximum earned entitlements. The department operates 12 field offices as well as four state veteran cemeteries,

(two in East, one in Middle and one in West Tennessee) to assist families and survivors throughout the State of Tennessee.

The Administrative Division is responsible for initiating and coordinating public relations, legislative activities, service officers training, statistical reporting, strategic planning, outreaches, and management of fiscal and administrative requirements.

The department's mission is to serve Tennessee's veterans and their families with dignity and compassion; to be the veterans' advocate by ensuring they receive quality care, support, entitlements and the recognition earned in service to the nation; and to enhance citizens' awareness of the sacrifices that veterans have made for us.

APPROACH/METHODOLOGY

A Top to Bottom Review team comprised of the department's executive staff and other key personnel was assembled to review the current processes and procedures for the department and make recommendations on how we could more efficiently and effectively operate. The only response the team members could not use was: "Because we've always done it that way."

The major areas of consideration were:

- Customer Service
- Field Operations
- Cemeteries
- Leadership Responsibilities
- Real Property



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Increase the number of fully developed claims upon initial submission from 50% to 80%.

Discussion: Due to the complexity of actually adjudicating and rating claims the USVA Regional Office can process a veteran's claim much more quickly if all required documentation is provided upon initial submission. Increasing the percentage of fully developed claims reduces wait times for veterans, backlogs for USVA and the number of inquiries submitted to TDVA.

Department leadership and our training officer have included this goal/performance standard into quarterly training meetings. We are currently utilizing statistical sampling to determine progress. Time required to reach the goal is 5 years. (Note: Attaining 100% is not possible due to circumstances that are outside TDVA control and will continue to exist)

Recommendation 2: In all Tennessee counties, complete one-on-one briefings with county leadership, conduct "Veterans' Outreaches", and promote community awareness of the sacrifices that veterans have made for us.

Discussion: As part of our department's strategic plan, it is imperative that we conduct one-on-one briefings with county mayors and county executives to ensure they are fully aware of the importance of hiring, resourcing and training a full-time County Service Office to assist veterans.

An essential part of keeping Tennessee veterans informed is through an aggressive outreach program, as well as making every citizen aware of the sacrifices veterans have made for all of us. This 5-year-plan will improve service to veterans while reducing the demand on our Veteran Benefits Representatives (VBRs) and at the same time increase state revenue. Through the use of public service announcements, social media, marketing material, media releases and public speaking engagements TDVA continues to educate our

communities on the sacrifices that veterans have made for our country.

Recommendation 3: Change leadership responsibilities from functional area to geographical area.

Discussion: After careful evaluation of the Department of Veterans Affairs' structure, it became apparent that supervision of the TDVA personnel and management of our facilities would become much more effective by reorganizing our Executive Leadership Team to provide coverage in each grand division. This could be accomplished by adding a deputy commissioner and properly positioning two assistant commissioners, one in East and another in West Tennessee.

This initiative will enable the department to better serve our veterans while promoting customer service and improving communications with local leadership, law makers and Veterans Service Organizations.

This recommendation has been completed.

Recommendation 4: Co-locate facilities/field offices with other state agencies.

Discussion: A review of how the department might enhance its access to veterans, increase customer service and reduce leased space was conducted.

During this review, communications with other state agencies uncovered opportunities to co-locate our personnel which reduced our footprint, saved state dollars and improved our service to veterans by promoting a "one-stop" shop concept.

Recommendation 5: Move headquarters from current location to the Tennessee Tower.

Discussion: With our current lease agreement nearing an end, we were able to negotiate space on the 13th floor of the William R. Snodgrass Building, Tennessee Tower. By relocating from a leased facility to a state owned building it enabled TDVA to increase efficiency with other departments, save state dollars and improve inter-agency communication and coordination.

This recommendation has been completed

Recommendation 6: Implement a control system for priority inquiries.

Discussion: Due to the high volume of priority inquiries and a need to track this type of correspondence, TDVA developed a new control system. This new process increases service to veterans while decreasing delays and errors. It also provides a tracking mechanism for legislative/priority inquiries.

This recommendation has been completed

